

HYSTERIA AND DEVOTION.

To whichever page of history we turn, we find a family likeness in all the mental manifestations of the human family. The same physiological phenomena appear generation after generation, century after century, and no matter under what form of faith—Pagan or Christian, Jew, Turk, or Infidel. In the wild excitement of the Dancing Dervish we recognise the same spirit as that which led the Flagellant to bare his back to the lash, and walk through the market-place with the red blood streaming from shoulder to heel; and in the Assassin of the Mountains, who rushes into Paradise mad with hachshish and fanaticism, we see the twin brother of him who storms the gates of the Christian grave in the distinct belief of saintly direction. It is all the same thing, the same cause, with a slight variation in the manner only, of the result. One belief or mental condition we find under every dispensation, and that is the belief in extraordinary religious experiences and extraordinary religious revelations. Prophets and oracles, ghost-seers and visionaries, wonder-workers and miracle-mongers, troop in crowds through the pages of history, and the modern world is beset by the same, with nothing changed but dress and name—broadcloth and tweeds in lieu of padusoy suits and linen ephods; table-turnings, spirit-rappings, and revivals, in the place of witchcraft, communion with angels, the gift of prophecy, and the power of God.

Moral epidemics are as catching as fevers, and creeds and experiences come into fashion after their due seed-time of neglect and derision. But the most singular thing is, the persistence with which people call a certain physiological condition by high religious names, though they have branded that same condition as devil's work or imposture when manifested outside the pale of their special church. The Convulsionnaires, who writhed, and foamed, and beat their heads against stone walls, and flung themselves into cataleptic fits before the tomb of the Archdeacon Paris, were quite convinced that catalepsy was a divine condition, and that the great mysteries of Heaven were best revealed by strong hysterics. The nuns of Loudun, who had gone through the same experiences before them, were equally sure that their state was due to witchcraft and the devil. Urban Grandier had bewitched them; and the handsome, clever, dissolute priest had to pay with his life the penalty attached in those days to the hysterical mania of unmarried young women. The whole story of the bewitched everywhere is only a diary of catalepsy or epilepsy, hysteria or scrofula, with a great deal of ignorance and superstition superadded. These are truly and literally the tap roots of all the supernaturalism extant. This supernaturalism, this divine afflatus and influence, is still more

marked in the East than in the West. We Saxons have never come up to the feats of the Swinging Fakirs, to the self-inflicted tortures of the Sûnyâsis, to the marvellous power of temporary annihilation of the Absorbed. Just as our jugglery is less esoteric and more cumbersome than theirs, so is our nervous organisation less intense. Yet, indeed, no Eastern devotee ever attempted a greater marvel than did that American lady-medium not so long ago, when she underwent all the pains and throes of maternity to give human life and human intelligence to a certain motive machine, a thing of chains and springs and pulleys, which were to be vivified by her into a new saviour of mankind. No Sûnyâsi would have dreamed of such a conjunction of hysteria and mechanics. The Easterns are beyond us chiefly in the biological effects common under the name of spirit rappings and spirit communications. If one of our miracle men can make me hear music and singing from the four corners of the ceiling, and when the only instrument in the room is an old worn out guitar that apparently plays itself and sings to its own accompaniment; if he can call up spirits from the grave, and tell me the secrets of the other life, finish Byron's unfinished poems, and round off Plato's fragmentary philosophy; the Eastern wizards can do quite as much, and with a less expenditure of vital forces. A Hindoo burglar, well up in his trade, can "hold the eyes" of the inmates of the house he enters, so that they shall not be able to see door or weapon, though they well know where both stand, and in half an hour, when they are not wanted, will find them all close at hand; and the power of the evil eye is by no means scoffed at, even by English ladies of sense and education, when crafty old hags sit cross-legged at the gate, yelling and cursing from sunrise to sundown, and the child falls mysteriously ill the next day. The witches of Huntingdonshire, of Auldearne, Salem, and the Blockula, did no more; the bewitched did no less; and both East and West must mingle together in the smoke that issues from the bubbling caldron, and in the magic circle round the footsteps of the enchanter.

But hysteria sometimes assumes other forms, and leaves off necromancy and intercourse with spirits to take to sudden conversion and orthodox godliness. Yet even here the East again runs before us, holding the torch to show the way. The excitement of the Marabout, the rapture of the Absorbed, the fervour of the Assassin, the gloomy fanaticism of the Thug, when he dedicates body, soul, and life to Divè; and, earlier still, the initiated into the greater mysteries of Eleusis, the visitor to the Cave of Trophonius, the wild Menads crying, "Bacche! Bacche! Evoë! Evoë!" all offer examples of sudden conversion from a worldly to a religious life, as genuine as those which took place on the Mourners' Seat in the Backwoods Revivals, or as those now convulsing Belfast and the north of Ireland with hysteric groans. The physiological condition was the same: the only difference was in the name given to it. We would speak slight-

ingly of no human creed. We would cast no doubt or scorn on even the wildness of sincerity, or sneer at the most fantastic forms of faith; but we would call things by their right names—at least by such names as seem to our reason and experience to be right; and when we see a group of howling hysterical people, we must altogether decline to say that they are divinely possessed, or specially gifted with superior gifts. They are in a state of high nervous excitement, in an abnormal physical condition altogether; but we do not take that to be a miracle, or the sign of God's direct dealing with them, no more than we take madness to be a sign of special grace—which yet was a doctrine held by many wise men under the Cæsars, and is still devoutly believed by many ignorant people of our own day behind the Swiss mountains.

The Revivals in Ireland seem to be nowise different to the Convulsionary movement or to the Eastern excesses spoken of before; they seem to be nothing more or less than a special direction of what may be called epidemic hysteria. They present all the features of hysteria, just as the American Revivals did, years ago. But the symptoms are modified—the disease is evidently not so severe. There has been nothing yet like the experiences of Peter Cartwright, the brawny Backwoods preacher, who struck down men and women by hundreds in his monster camp meetings, and for every case of mental disease counted a soul snatched from sin to grace. Under his powerful preaching, modest young women, flushed and dishevelled, like so many Bacchantes, drunk with preaching instead of wine, went leaping and shouting over the camp, crying, "Glory! Glory!" till they made the old brown woods ring again; strong men yelled and foamed and fainted under the excess of their terrors and the heavy conviction of sin; and dissolute young "rowdies," who had gone to scoff, got caught in their own toils, and fell before the altar, bellowing for pardon and mercy before the prayer for sinners came to an end. The Irish Revivals are considerably milder than their pattern; but they are none the less diseased manifestations because the disease is not so virulent. They have had their groups of grovelling sinners howling, "Glory," and "Pardon," "Jesus," and "Amen," as the preacher bade; and there have been some so powerfully affected as to call forth the most enthusiastic delight from watching and believing Evangelical ministers;—for the more excitable the nervous organisation the nearer to grace and holiness. But, though the Irish preachers have failed to produce the mighty effects common to Peter Cartwright's ministry, they have had the gift of working miracles; or, rather, the Revival has been accompanied by miracles. The *Daily News* of the 19th of September, quoting the *North British Mail*, gives the following story:

"A REVIVALIST MIRACLE.—We have just seen a letter from a father in Moyse, two miles from the town of Newton-Limavady, to his son in Greenock, in which, speaking of the revivals in that district,

he says: 'We had the pleasure of hearing two young converts address an assembly at different times since you went away. They were both Papists before they were converted, but are now true Catholics, being brought to the knowledge of the truth. One of them was dumb all his days until stricken down the second time, and the love of God was shed abroad in his heart so very much that he prayed that the Lord might open his mouth and let loose his tongue, that he might tell others what God had done for his soul. From that time God heard him, and did open his mouth, and he can now speak as plain as any man, and it is only five months since he was stricken down, and he is now able to read a little; but he has a very great many portions of Scripture that he can repeat, that he has learned by hearing since that time; and he can address an assembly middling well. Up to his being stricken down no one ever knew a word he said, not even his own people, who held communication with him by signs.'"

Others have had signs and symbols printed on their breasts; many have borne about them the sacred name of "Geasus" written by the agency of the Holy Spirit; which, however, resolved itself into a darning-needle and the blue-bag, combined with a daring contempt of ordinary orthography; and some have had blood stains and wounds on their hands and feet. Others have had miraculous visions; and one "good woman," quoted by Dr. M'Cosh, had certain spiritual doubts and fears which a lonely female figure came to relieve. But the figure "was far too like the Virgin to comport with the ideas of a Protestant," says Dr. M'Cosh. Some have been struck blind and deaf, and many have gone crazed—which is by far the most natural termination of the movement. Of the general willingness to believe supernaturalism in the most natural thing whatsoever, the following anecdote is a convincing proof: A young woman was crying very earnestly for mercy, when a lad, seeing a flash of light on the window, cried out, "She will get peace now. I see the light!" The others caught up and echoed the cry; and though the candle which had caused that sudden flash came in sight, they were hardly to be convinced that they had not seen a supernatural sign of God's gracious acceptance of this woman's soul! Yet if these nervous feelings run into any of the ordinary mesmeric phenomena, the ministers then put them down as of Satan, not of God. Hysteria is divine; but, hysteria manifested as somnambulism or as mesmerism is simply devilish.

This movement is not confined to the poor only. Certainly the poor and ignorant have borne the largest share in it; and the more poor and the more ignorant they are, the larger has been their share. The sequence is logical enough. But they are not quite isolated. Dr. M'Cosh says, "It is not to be forgotten that not a few of the educated classes have felt the power of this movement. I have heard of between twelve and twenty students who have experienced a spiritual change during the past summer. One young gentleman, who moves in a genteel circle, and who has himself, I believe, been savingly impressed, told me a few weeks ago that he knew of upwards of twenty persons, young gentlemen

and ladies, among his acquaintance in Belfast, who were seriously inquiring after salvation." A gentleman of some property, "connected with the liquor traffic," and owner of several public-houses in Newcastle, was so impressed, during a Revivalist meeting held there, that he declared in full congregation his intention of giving up all connexion with this said liquor traffic, and of living in the ways of teetotalism for the future. The meeting was taken by storm, and the declaration "impressed many powerfully." Much stress has been laid by the Revivalists, and those of the Evangelical Alliance favourable to its excesses, on the decrease of drunkenness, and the increase of good works and practical piety among the converted; or, as the phrase goes, "those who have got religion." One clergyman gives us quite a picture of a Christian Arcadia:

"The moral change in the Protestant population seems to keep pace with the religious movement. Drunkenness has almost entirely disappeared from among them. I understand that the collector of revenue in one district—not a very large one—has stated that the consumption of spirits within his boundary has fallen off at the rate of 600*l.* per month. The testimony of all whom I met was to the same effect. Rioting and ill-conduct in the small towns have also passed away. I myself visited one evening, after dark, the public-houses of a once very drunken town, and found them empty of customers. Quietness and peace have entered into neighbourhoods which before were torn by party strife. A gentleman who is in the habit of examining witnesses in the sessions' courts told me of the great change which he observed in the manner of taking an oath, and the cautious way in which testimony is now given lest anything should be stated amiss. A friend observed to me that even petty thefts of fruit from orchards and gardens, which he used to be aware of, are now not known; and the churchwardens of a parish church have remarked poor people, whom they never knew to contribute before, now dropping their pence and halfpence into the alms-box."

Another speaks of congregations of ministers of all denominations—Episcopalians and Presbyterians, Independents, Methodists, Baptists, and Romanists, meeting in paternal love and Christian union, reading, and praying, and singing praises together. Another clergyman, "a man of sound judgment," speaks of the peace and quiet of Sandy-row, the former scene of riot and mischief, but where now "the policemen say there is no drunkenness or trouble of any kind." "A driver of the car yesterday said that in one place in the country he had seen people fall down thirty at a time, crying for mercy. 'What did he think it was?' 'Why sure it must be the works of the Almighty!' The Catholics say it's the work of the devil, but I always tell them, Would the devil teach people to pray?" Mr. Sewell says that "even Romanists are standing in awe, and that many have professed conversion; that there is no drunkenness, and no work doing at the police courts." The Rev. B. Trench says that a solicitor told him litigation had ceased; a publican, that no man could live by that trade; lost women were fast

disappearing—"they had cried to Jesus for mercy;" the savings banks' deposits had greatly increased, which at least shows commendable thrift in the saints; political feeling was dead; quarrelling at an end; one editor of a public newspaper "has been entirely incapacitated from collecting his thoughts on any other subject;" and "compositors in a printing-office have been unable, through strong feelings of sin and bodily weakness, to go on with their ordinary work." Others assert "the most entire change in the manners and morals of the people;" the general habit of family worship and the discontinuance of swearing and profane language; the extinction of religious feuds, the abolition of sectarian differences, and the rolling of the full flood of harmony, peace, and goodwill. Unfortunately, those fatal figures—those unenthusiastic, disbelieving, obstinate statistics—come to destroy all these beautiful assertions. In the four months immediately preceding the Revivals—from January to April, inclusive—there was a falling off of one hundred and twenty-nine in the number of persons committed for crime (chiefly for being "drunk and disorderly") as compared with the four corresponding months of the previous year. From May, when the Revivals began, to August, the excess of persons so committed was no fewer than four hundred and eighty-two, compared with the four corresponding months in eighteen hundred and fifty-eight. Thus, we have indubitable evidence that there was less crime when there were no Revivals, no Christian Arcadia, no miracles, and no hysteria, but just the usual plodding, everyday virtues which attempted nothing supernatural, and were content with simple duty, than there was when people were foaming at the mouth as they yelled for grace and mercy—grovelling by scores in the dust and mud at the feet of ignorant fanatics dealing largely in universal damnation, and the impossibility of the non-Revivalist to be saved. The most immoral scenes take place on Sunday nights; precisely on those very nights when the preaching is wildest, loudest, most excited. Fifty persons and more have generally, on Monday mornings, to answer to the Belfast magistrates for their offences of the Sabbath evening previous. And, indeed, this is only the unanswerable logic of human nature, which always makes a more turbulent outfall for itself in proportion to the strictness of the barrier it overleaps; and which, when thoroughly moved and excited—no matter how in the beginning—turns to excess and immorality as the best relief known to the passionate and ignorant.

It is gratifying, though, to know that all pious men are not the dupes of the physiological phenomena sought to be ranked as divine gifts. Clergymen in the Revival district, have written their strong and sorrowful protest against the whole movement. One, who has met with much contumely and scorn because of his want of faith, speaks of the total want of any real reformation among the "struck." They speak more nasally, often quote the Scriptures, see

visions, read their names in the "Lamb's Book of Life"—but not that of their unbelieving pastor—and have revelations by the score. But they are not a whit better in outside morals, and a vast deal worse inwardly, if spiritual pride, uncharitableness, and self-conceit be things to be ranked as moral deteriorations. Another clergyman, who has been much engaged among the Revivalists, and who writes his experiences, takes no more cheerful tone. He says, boldly, that the more marked the hysterical phenomena, the more generally immoral is the life; that "many of the subjects of the delusion are worse than they were before, if spiritual pride and arrogance, self-righteousness, and a disposition to prefer their own inspirations to the teaching of the Bible, are symptoms;" that "a diseased state of mind, has, in some cases, been induced, which threatens to become chronic; that instances of insanity are by no means rare, and homes, once happy and industrious, have presented scenes at which any Christian heart would ache." This same clergyman also speaks of the "bitter persecution" manifested in Ulster against all who do not believe in the divine origin and direction of this movement, and distinctly asserts that, "almost without exception," the Revival has not produced one instance of actual, open, undeniable "newness of life." A medical man, with all his medical skill and knowledge engrafted on to a very decided Christian faith, advocates the dashing of cold water into the faces of the "struck." Cold water has always been the best corrective of hysteria; and the old monks were right when they made it one of their means of exorcising the devil out of the unclean. "Hysteria is an accident, like a flood of tears," says this M.D., writing to the *Daily News* of the nineteenth of September; "it has nothing to do with the truth or not of the religious emotions, which can only be judged of by its merits in improved conduct. The hysteria should be firmly and sternly discountenanced as a morbid symptom, and one very capable of spreading by imitation. Cold water dashed upon the face, so as to wet the hair and clothes, and to make the hysterical person as uncomfortable as possible, with the sotto voce announcement to send for large scissors to cut off the female's hair, or a razor to shave the effeminate man's beard, would, if resolutely adopted by a resolute man, determined to conquer the hysteria, put a stop to it in the persons affected, and on those around liable to be affected by imitation."

It seems to us that this M.D.'s advice is the soundest practical good sense. It is a pity there is no one with sufficiently large will to try its effect in Belfast. Every one knows how very infectious nervous diseases are. Madness may be caught literally like small-pox; and one hysterical girl in a community is sure to be countenanced by half a dozen companions. A boy was whipped not long ago at a school, and fell into nervous convulsions; immediately there was a succession of small boys in convulsions, falling into that state from sympathy and imitation, not very un-

like what the Revivalists do in Ulster. The worst mischief is in the spread of these religious manias. Wales is becoming affected now, and the *Times* of October the eighth gives the following account of how they are proceeding there:

"**REVIVALS IN WALES.**—Simultaneously with the outbreak of Revivals in Ireland, religious meetings on a large scale were held in various parts of the principality, and the movement has since been making considerable progress. The effects produced on those who attend these gatherings appear to be similar to those described in the accounts from Ireland. Some fall to the ground shrieking and crying, while others indulge in an hour or two of prayer. The addresses of the preachers are fervent and enthusiastic, and the excitement under which they labour is easily communicated to a Welsh audience. At Aberystwith the Revival seemed to be dying out fast, but within the last week or two it has derived fresh strength from quite an unexpected source. A party of militia men are stationed in the town, and they have come to the determination to hold daily prayer meetings. Not satisfied with these 'spiritual exercises,' as they are termed, once a day, the men now assemble every morning before parade and every evening after parade. In Pembrokeshire and Carmarthenshire the Revivalists say the movement is rapidly gaining ground, and preachers who have been listened to for many years by their congregations with the utmost composure now produce an extraordinary effect. No attempt, however, has yet been made to show that crime has decreased in consequence of this change. The inhabitants of the border counties have not been much affected by the Revivals at present, although a clergyman of the Church of England preached on the subject a fortnight ago at Newport, Monmouthshire, and expressed a hope that the 'good work' would extend to his own town and his own congregation. At Tredegar, however, a revival of temperance has occurred, and this, it is said, is the forerunner of the conversion of many. An itinerant cutler has induced three thousand persons in this place alone to sign the pledge, and subscriptions to the amount of two thousand pounds have been received towards building a new temperance hall. This is a large sum of money, the fact being taken into consideration that a large proportion of those who have given it are miners. In no part of Wales have phenomena similar to those reported to have occurred in Ireland been witnessed—no one has had 'revelations,' nor have any symbols been stamped on the persons of the Revivalists. The meetings, however, have occasionally been vast, and hundreds are unable to get near enough to the preacher to hear a word of his address. Prayer meetings are daily held in numerous places, and supplications offered for the spread of the Revival."

Nothing is more melancholy than to see the greedy eagerness with which any abnormal physical condition whatever is caught up as food for superstition, and as evidence of a supernatural dispensation. We know so little of what is really natural, that surely it is simply presumption to say that anything not quite easily accounted for by our present knowledge is, therefore, outside the healthy laws of nature, and only to be explained by reference to direct miracle. God does not deal by partial laws, still less by capricious movements and temporary and local revelations. And, indeed, the Revivalists get themselves in-

volved in a terrible labyrinth if they assert the divine origin of hysteria in one place; for if so, what about the others? What about the frantic Assassin, the Dervish who falls as if dead after his mad religious exercises? What about the Convulsionnaires, the Bewitched, the earlier disciples of mesmerism, the medium, who attempts to give real birth, or life, to a wooden man, with clockwork inside? What about Johanna Southcote, Irving and his tongues, Thom, the second advent, or the ordinary religious maniac in the asylums? If hysteria and nervous excitement are to go as divine conditions in one place, and under one name, so must they in another.

The Irish Revivals, like the American, do not differ one hair-breadth in origin from all the other phenomena and manifestations that fill the pages of history. The pythoness, and the young American girl who leaped over the camp with streaming hair and frantic gestures, the Irish men and women now foaming in Belfast, the Eastern devotees, the Revivalists, the Convulsionnaires, and the hysterically Bewitched, are all of one birth and one cause. The moving power with each was, and is, Disease combined with Ignorance; hysteria, nervous excitement, weak intellect, and superstition, having to answer for all the supernaturalism and divine influence supposed to exist. We say this sorrowfully and tenderly; not irreverently nor scornfully of any human creature's faith, but in the cause of truth, and as believers in the wholeness and wholesomeness of nature and humanity.

